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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody. I'd like to call the meeting to order.

The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), is studying the needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans.

This morning we have two panels.

By video conference from Saskatoon, we have Faith McIntyre, director general, policy and research division, strategic policy and commemoration, Veterans Affairs Canada. Also by video conference, from Charlottetown, we have Hélène Robichaud, director general, commemoration division, strategic policy and commemoration. We also have Maryse Savoie, acting director general, field operations division, service delivery branch.

Ms. Savoie, we'll start with your 10 minutes for an opening statement. We'll have questions to follow.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Maryse Savoie (Acting Director General Field Operations, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

My name is Maryse Savoie and I am the acting director general of field operations at Veterans Affairs Canada. I am responsible for nearly 1,200 employees across Canada in 38 sector offices and 31 Integrated Personal Support Centres and satellite offices. Field operations employees work directly with veterans and their family; they are at the heart of the mandate of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC).

I would like to thank you for the invitation to appear before the committee. I am accompanied today by my colleagues Faith McIntyre, director general, policy and research division, and by Hélène Robichaud, director general for the commemoration division, who will also be speaking to you in a few minutes as part of our opening statement.

[*English*]

Our department recognizes and welcomes the participation, achievements, and sacrifices of all Canadian veterans, including indigenous veterans. We are committed to increasing awareness of the contribution of indigenous veterans through commemoration activities and our commemorative program as a whole.

[*Translation*]

My colleague Hélène Robichaud will be able to tell you more about the department's work in this area.

We are also committed to increasing indigenous veterans' awareness of our programs and services. To that end, we have not only established relationships with national partners, but we also now maintain a strong presence at the local level through a variety of awareness activities and information sessions with partners and directly with veterans, across Canada.

Since August 2016, we have also expanded our presence with veterans living in northern Canada. Front-line employees regularly travel to Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Iqaluit to meet veterans and their family, as well as partners and local service providers. These meetings enable us to establish and build solid relationships with these partners and to provide veterans living in those communities with information on our programs and services.

[*English*]

We do not know how many indigenous veterans live in the territories, but we know that these outreach and information efforts are crucial for overcoming barriers to access to information in remote communities.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

Although the same standard applies to all veterans, we nevertheless ensure that our service delivery is adapted to the cultural realities of the veterans we serve.

[*English*]

Still, as part of our awareness initiative in northern Canada, we prepare our schedule, visits, and activities with the local communities and partners to ensure that they are culturally appropriate. We are also currently exploring options that would enable us to provide our front-line employees with training on indigenous culture.

[*Translation*]

Since all federal public service employees have an important role to play in terms of reconciliation, Veterans Affairs Canada recently invited all its employees, including front-line employees, to participate in the Indigenous Learning Series offered by the Canada School of Public Service. These workshops enable our employees to better understand reconciliation and the importance of renewing relationships with indigenous peoples.

Although we are determined to provide veterans and their family with the support they need, when they need it, where they are, access to services in remote regions can sometimes be a challenge, not due to a lack of willingness on the department's part. The fact remains that the community and provincial resources to which VAC can direct its clients are sometimes limited.

[*English*]

All veterans can nevertheless count on the extensive network of VAC service locations and the extended network of Service Canada service centres, which provide information on VAC programs and services in over 558 locations in virtually every community in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Regardless of where they live, veterans who need them can count on home visits by nurses, occupational therapists and their case manager.

[*English*]

Veterans and their families can always contact VAC employees through our national contact centre network as well as our 24-hour assistance service. Information on programs and services can be easily obtained by visiting the VAC website, which includes the benefits navigator, an extremely useful tool.

Veterans who prefer interacting online can use My VAC Account for access day or night, seven days a week, to send us secure messages or to apply for benefits and to access them.

At this point, I'm going to stop and let my colleague Faith McIntyre continue.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Faith McIntyre (Director General, Policy and Research Division, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Ms. Savoie.

Good morning, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

[*English*]

Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to serving all veterans in accordance with the same standards of excellence, regardless of time, place, or circumstance.

[*Translation*]

VAC offers a wide range of services to help veterans, including indigenous veterans, and their families. These services includes support for veterans following an injury or as they transition to civilian life. All veterans can contact us to find out more about the programs and services for which they may qualify.

However, as my colleague indicated, we are aware that barriers may exist for veterans living in remote regions in terms of access to resources. However, we are determined to make improvements and steps have already been taken to address this.

[*English*]

Stakeholder engagement with indigenous groups is essential to ensure that the department is aware of and addressing gaps in support of indigenous veterans. Currently, there are six ministerial advisory groups that provide advice and guidance on a variety of topics to the minister and the department. Each of the groups includes an indigenous member, which ensures that the groups consider the unique needs of Canada's indigenous veterans when addressing issues such as outreach to veterans, the complexity of application processes, access to services, and cultural differences, to name a few.

Additionally, the contributions of the indigenous members enrich the group's deliberations by offering indigenous perspectives or options on issues such as treatment options for post-traumatic stress disorder.

I'd now like to turn to my colleague, Hélène Robichaud.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Robichaud (Director General, Commemoration Division, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen.

[*English*]

I'll be speaking specifically on commemorating the military service and sacrifice of our indigenous peoples.

[*Translation*]

Canada's indigenous peoples have a proud tradition of military service. While exact numbers are difficult to determine, the rate of indigenous participation in Canada's military has been significant. It is estimated that more than 12,000 indigenous people from Canada served in the two world wars, the Korean War and in more recent international peace support efforts, with at least 500 of them losing their lives.

These determined volunteers often had to overcome challenges in their quest to serve, from learning a new language and adapting to cultural differences to travelling long distances from remote communities just to enlist, and to share in the cause of peace.

[*English*]

From the commemoration perspective, our department has traditionally marked the military service of indigenous peoples within activities and programming aimed at remembering the service of Canadian veterans more broadly.

The spirit of this approach was perhaps most eloquently captured by Mr. James Brady, when he was asked about his service in the context of his identity as a member of the Métis community. Reflecting on the service of indigenous veterans during the Second World War, Mr. Brady said:

> ...true destiny is not bound by the success or failure attendant upon Métis deliberation.... It is bound up with our continued existence as Canadians who fight [for] those liberties to which we are all devoted....

In modern times, our government takes its sacred obligation to recognize and honour the contributions of our veterans very seriously. While the conflicts of the 20th century have proven that peace is very costly to individuals, families, and communities, we have also learned that peace is a journey rather than a destination; peace is fragile and sacred; and peace is essential for Canada.

In honouring and respecting this fundamental and universal Canadian value, our program is committed to finding inclusive and culturally relevant ways to engage youth and raise awareness of those who have contributed so much to what we, as Canadians, hold so dear.

[*Translation*]

In 2005, the Year of the Veteran, the Government of Canada, through VAC's commemoration program, supported an aboriginal spiritual journey to the battlefields and cemeteries of Europe. While previous commemorative journeys had included indigenous veterans and other representatives, the aboriginal spiritual journey focused exclusively on the traditions that Canada's indigenous peoples have used throughout the ages to pay tribute to fallen warriors.

The journey would serve as a source of healing for all indigenous veterans and their families. It offered spiritual elders from communities across Canada, as identified and selected by an Aboriginal Veterans Working Group, the honour of leading ceremonies at key Canadian commemorative sites in Europe based on indigenous custom. This included the opportunity for indigenous spiritual leaders to conduct a "Calling Home" ceremony, during which the spirits of fallen warriors were called home to the ancestral lands they left when they embarked for Europe.

The journey was inspired by the efforts of several leaders from Canada's indigenous community, including Mr. Ed Borchert, past president of the National Metis Veterans Association, and Mr. Ray Rogers, former chairman of the First Nations Veterans of Canada.

Who were the driving forces behind this initiative? The Aboriginal Veterans Working Group included senior representatives from Canada's various indigenous peoples who jointly developed the journey program. Delegates included indigenous veterans of the Second World War and senior indigenous leaders of the day, as well as indigenous elders and youth. In addition to veteran representatives the program incorporated significant indigenous cultural elements.

● (1120)

[*English*]

From the commemoration program perspective, the journey—called the "aboriginal spiritual journey" back in 2005—helped increase awareness within Veterans Affairs Canada and the Government of Canada of the importance of remembering the service and sacrifice of indigenous people over the years. Significant efforts have since been made to ensure that Canada's indigenous veterans are honoured throughout program activities led by Veterans Affairs.

Commemorating indigenous veterans is highlighted now through the commemoration program's different areas of responsibility, which are: our overseas and domestic activities; the books of remembrance and the Canadian virtual war memorial; our commemorative partnership program; memorials that are national and international symbols; our Heroes Remember programs and interviews; the Minister of Veterans Affairs commendations; our European operations, such as, for example, our new Vimy visitor education centre located in Vimy, France; and, finally, our learning program.

VAC's commemorative learning program, for example, includes material related to indigenous veterans' service. The program and topical learning materials distributed annually reach hundreds of thousands of Canadian youth in hundreds of schools from coast to coast to coast. The program shines a spotlight on the experiences of individuals as a way to illustrate the overall service of the larger indigenous community, including the indigenous soldiers, foreign battlefields, historical booklets, and an indigenous veterans historical sheet and other print and online resources that tell stories of the individual service personnel as part of the larger narrative of indigenous military service.

[*Translation*]

In conclusion, the commemoration of Indigenous people who have proudly served in Canada's military is a clearly demonstrated element within VAC's broader Canada Remembers Program.

As the Canada Remembers Program seeks to build on its Road to Peace theme over the coming years, elevating and enriching the national dialogue on remembrance in our country, VAC will seek out appropriate opportunities to promote remembrance of indigenous veterans' achievements and sacrifices. These efforts will naturally include increasing awareness on the service of indigenous peoples.

VAC-led commemorative activities will increasingly focus on engaging younger veterans and youth in commemorating our military history and heritage, including the proud role of Canada's indigenous peoples, in communities across the country and overseas.

I thank you for having granted me some of your time today. My colleague Maryse Savoie will now conclude our presentation.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: In conclusion, although we are on the right track, we recognize that our service delivery model must also adapt to new realities and technologies, and we will continue to explore new ways to reach our clients wherever they are in Canada.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you for your presentations this morning. They're very much appreciated.

As a committee, we've just returned from a tour across Canada to meet with indigenous veterans. It was very educational. There's nothing like being face to face and hearing their stories.

Historically speaking, Canada has not done a good job of valuing these people when they've come home. We heard over and over again how proud they were to serve and how much it meant to them to be representing Canada, and we heard that when they were on the battlefield or in their units there was no sense of not belonging. Everyone was a soldier. They were all together.

However, they started to face the issues, of course, when they came home thinking that they would be valued for having done that. Instead, they felt very much second class.... Part of that, I believe, was probably due to the fact that a lot of them returned to their homes and a lot of them were isolated.

Now we are trying to deal with this, which is good, but it's very late when you realize, coming from a rural community, that rural life has been there forever. I'm wondering what the current practices are in tracking and reporting injuries and the needs of indigenous veterans who are in more isolated environments.

● (1125)

Ms. Maryse Savoie: As part of the budget 2016 announcement, VAC committed to expand its outreach to the north and to visit up north 12 times a year. In terms of the purpose of VAC outreach, when we refer to the north, we refer to the Yukon, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories. Although northern Labrador and northern Quebec were not initially part of the announcement, we are now doing outreach in these two locations as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: We did visit Beauval, Saskatchewan. I joke that quite often even as the weather is reported across the nation somehow we jump over Saskatchewan.

There are a number of veterans there who receive really no services. When I hear about northern outreach and 12 times a year, that's a huge area to cover with just 12 visits. They ask about having services that come to them, that transport to them on a regular basis, such as this idea of case managers, physiotherapists, and doctors coming to them. That's not actually a reality at this time.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Well, actually, when we go to visit, we send teams of case managers and veterans service agents. They go as a pair. They announce their visit quite a while in advance. We rely on our partners to relay the word that we're coming. We also have posters that are posted in different locations.

They take appointments. Veterans and their families come to them, but they also go to the veterans, and they sometimes do home visits in quite remote locations.

It is our first year. We've done the 12 visits. Of course, the focus for the first year was really on outreach, on getting the word out, identifying good partners, and building relationships with partners. That is really the key in order to promote our benefits and programs.

Now they're seeing a switch. They're more into direct services, because there's such a need and such an increased volume of clients coming to them. For example, in the north—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm sorry. Can I can ask one more question? We're probably running out of time.

Could we see the results of those visits and where you went, how many individuals were interacted with, and what the game plan is going forward as to what services would be provided where?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Yes. I can give you some statistics. So far in these three territories, we are providing services to 515 veterans and family members. Out of those, 90 are case-managed veterans.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do I have more time, Chair?

The Chair: Yes. You have a minute.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: There's one other thing specific to indigenous veterans. We found as we travelled that a lot of our veterans are actually U.S. veterans, because back in the day they had to give up their status to serve in Canada. They chose that and, of course, that bounty doesn't exist for them in the same way that it does for others in our country. Do we have outreach to them as well to ensure that they are getting the services they need—they're Canadian—in spite of the fact they served under the U.S.?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Yes, they served under the U.S. We have reciprocal agreements with many countries, the U.S. being one of them. We have some with South Africa, Australia, and the U.K., and we do provide services to allied veterans or veterans who have served in other countries. When we do reach out, we reach out to all veterans, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Samson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): I thank all three of you for your presentations.

In fact, your presentation was reassuring. We can see that good things are happening.

However, as my colleague Ms. Wagantall mentioned, our visit enlightened us further on existing problems and challenges.

● (1130)

[*English*]

I have a lot of questions, but I'll try to focus on three or four quickly. Maybe you can respond to them as quickly as possible.

First of all, are you only speaking about the services you're offering to the north, based on the budget? Or are we also speaking about B.C., Saskatchewan, and other places in western Canada? Please be very quick.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I'm talking about Nunavut, Yukon, Northwest Territories, northern Labrador, and northern Quebec.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Can we assume the same services are happening in Alberta, B.C. and—

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Oh yes, for sure—

Mr. Darrell Samson: —Saskatchewan? We didn't see that in Beauval and in a couple of others. We'll talk about that as well at another point.

You've talked about what has been happening since 2016. Can you very quickly explain what was happening prior to 2016, in the year before, and then in the year after 2016, just so I can have a better sense of what exactly is happening on the ground now? Very quickly, please.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Prior to 2016, we were not going up north as often as we go right now, and we didn't have the sensitivity that we have now.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I appreciate that. Based on your testimony, it's quite impressive.

You did say in your testimony as well that this isn't where one approach fits all, because there are all kinds of different challenges. I really appreciated that intervention. Can you give me an example or two of what you would do to support indigenous veterans in the north—because it's not as if one size fits all—that would would be somewhat different compared to with others?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I think the challenge in the north is to reach out and to establish trust and communication. We really have to work with the elders and the leaders from the communities in order to reach out to the veterans to establish trust and to be able to communicate effectively with them in respect of the local culture.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I really appreciate that. It was a learning curve. If you don't have the trust and the elders and partners on the ground in that area working with you, you're not going to be successful. That's so true.

You talked about cultural training. Can you give me a very quick picture of what it would look like?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Well, in terms of what it would look like, we're looking at options right now. What we wish to do is involve indigenous veterans themselves or indigenous elders or leaders in the development of the program. We also want to offer this program to our front-line staff, not only to the ones who are going up north, but to all our front-line staff.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'll tell you, it sounds really good, and I feel good listening to that.

Can you tell me very quickly what are the two or three key needs that you feel are clear? Are we responding to them? Or do we still need more research or a centre of excellence? What key challenges are we noticing? I don't want to know about rules, but about services and how we're coming aboard to make that happen.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: In terms of services, I think one of the challenges we have is the distance, so exploring new technology to reach out.... I'm not denying that meeting face-to-face is the best way, and not denying that up north there are issues with connectivity, the Internet, and so on, but I think that to be effective and to maintain the link in between visits, we need to explore the use of technology.

Mr. Darrell Samson: But what are their needs? If we were going to say "here are the three things that these indigenous veterans need", what are the services? What are their real needs?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: The needs are not so different from those of veterans who live outside of the north. They need support. They need mental health support. The families need support as well.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Is there anything with respect to the centre of excellence that can link this help? The centre of excellence is about research, data, and piloting. Is there anything we can draw from there that could even enhance our offering of services over time?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I think the enhancement comes from being more culturally sensitive to make sure that we integrate the cultural aspect of the indigenous people into all of our programs and the way we deliver services.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Darrell Samson: I know that my speaking time is up and so I want to thank all three of you for your presentation. I am going to listen to the answers you will provide during this meeting. I am anxious to learn more over time.

Thank you very much.

● (1135)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thanks to all of you for your testimony and your hard work.

There is a question I would like to ask. I've raised this before. In the United States, I think their goal is that about 30% of their caseworkers are former veterans. I'm wondering if you can give me an idea of how many staff at VAC are indigenous and how we are reflecting that in terms of front-line caseworkers. Is there any data you can share with us?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Maryse Savoie: At Veterans Affairs Canada we are really convinced of the advantage of having veterans within our service teams. Not only are we convinced of that fact, but we promote it. In fact, in the fall of 2016, our minister announced the creation of the Veterans in the Public Service Unit, or VPSU. The purpose of VPSU is really to support veterans in their integration into the public service and to promote the employability of veterans within the public service. VPSU will seek and create employment opportunities for veterans, and help them in a very practical way, for instance in preparing their CV, in preparing for interviews, and so on. So this is a very concrete way of including veterans in our service teams.

At VAC, our objective is that 10% of our workforce will be made up of veterans by July 1, 2020. At this time, we have reached 6%. This means that 144 veterans are working at Veterans Affairs Canada.

With regard to direct services and activities in the region, under my direction, 49 veterans have been integrated. We see a real advantage to the presence of these veterans in our offices, where they can really share their military culture and their experience and help us to better understand military reality.

[*English*]

Mr. Gord Johns: I really appreciate that. It's nice to know that there are some targets, because I didn't get that number until today. I've asked for this a lot.

What about indigenous veterans? Can you give me a number on indigenous veterans? If the goal is 10% by 2020—

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I don't have that specific data.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. It would be great to hear if the department could go in that direction in articulating this. When 2.8% of the people serving in the military are indigenous, it would be nice to see that reflected in terms of the caseworkers.

You've cited the fact that you're doing culturally sensitive training. I really appreciate that. I think it's really important to have caseworkers who are also culturally sensitive in understanding indigenous needs. Indigenous people who have served would certainly be able to fulfill that.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Perhaps I can add to that.

[*Translation*]

Indigenous people are included in the four employment equity groups. In this case also, we have targets to reach. At VAC, the target, subject to market availability, is 2.3%. Four per cent of our employees are of indigenous ancestry. We may assume that this includes some veterans, although we do not have the refined data to support that assumption.

I also want to mention that the figures are probably an underestimation, because for a veteran or an indigenous person to be identified as such, he or she must self-identify.

[*English*]

Not all veterans wish to self-declare themselves as such, so there might be a bit of under-representation in terms of the data.

Mr. Gord Johns: Right.

Specifically, how does VAC measure if staff are competent in dealing with return-to-work cases? I know that a proposal has come in from Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences to train 25 disabled veterans as disability management return-to-work coordinators. Is there a plan or a strategy on how to train return-to-work coordinators? The Province of B.C. has even identified that there's a lack of professional competence in its rehabilitation and return-to-work staff.

Ms. McIntyre, I think this might be directed toward you.

Ms. Faith McIntyre: Thank you very much for the question. Indeed, we have spoken about it before. I will be meeting with Wolfgang Zimmermann later this week further to the contact that you had provided to us. As I believe I stated to you earlier, I am slightly familiar with him and the National Institute of Disability Management and Research. We have indeed received the proposal. We currently are in the process of accepting proposals under our veteran and family well-being fund. The deadline is June 29. I encourage others as well to put in any type of responses.

Return-to-work and disability management is at the heart of any case management principles, and it certainly is an important competency in terms of the education and experience background we seek when we hire and employ our case managers across the country. We certainly are working toward doing the best we can to increase that competency profile, and look forward to reviewing the request for proposal from Pacific Coast University.

● (1140)

Mr. Gord Johns: All right. Thank you.

We know that the caregiver recognition benefit will be really important, especially for people in rural communities where they can't get access to services. One thing we heard was that the key for enrolment was that it was supposed to be automatic for people who were under the old program. Can you give me some idea of the number of recipients under the old and the new programs since 2006? Probably not? Okay.

That's a concern, as are some of the questions on the application, such as whether you're able to prepare food or dress yourself. The answer to both might be "yes", but a lot of it is not centred around mental health. We're hearing concerns from caregivers that people are getting denied, specifically people with PTSD who need support.

Is there anything you can comment on with regard to how you're going to revise that or correct that or make sure that people are getting the services?

The Chair: We're right out of time, so make your answer very short, please, or get back to us with that answer.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I would defer to Faith McIntyre to answer that question.

The Chair: Faith, we're very short on time. Sorry.

Ms. Faith McIntyre: Certainly.

I will say that the caregiver recognition benefit does indeed provide for mental health as well. We can provide you with statistics for that. I don't have them in front of me. Having said that, as with any policy, as the context and the environment shifts, we certainly are well aware of the need to continue an ongoing review of all our eligibility criteria as we move forward. Thank you for the comment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks to all of you for being here.

In the journey we had across the country visiting aboriginal veterans, over and above the obvious needs of those veterans, which are similar for all veterans in terms of services and awareness, it struck me that a very big aspect was the commemoration. I remember one aboriginal veteran saying—if I can quote accurately—that, you know, we had no allegiance to the crown, but we fought for the crown anyway, and we're proud of it.

I think that separates them, in a little way, from other veterans. How do we acknowledge their services? We talked about 2005. Is there a budget? Do you have the resources to tell Canadians about the things that aboriginal veterans have done in terms of service?

Ms. Hélène Robichaud: The answer is, yes, it is very much part of our existing program right now. Much like my colleagues have referenced, often it's based on self-declaration. For example, the heroes remember and interview program is based on oral histories, capturing either serving members or Canadians who would have done something extraordinary in terms of volunteering in the field of commemoration. These oral histories are posted on our website, but now clips are used extensively on social media. They go a very long way now, because it's a nice way to share stories and for family members to hear their stories. For us, I think there's more awareness that these tools are here for our indigenous veterans and our folks who are in rural Canada to be able to contribute and participate. So from a resource perspective, yes, we are; the challenge is to create more awareness of what is out there and for us to gather and garnish more information to be shared.

Going into the future, connecting with youth is really important. Modern-day veterans are also really important. We're finding in both cases that we have indigenous people who are serving and who served in the last conflict. Our challenge is about creating awareness. I am proud to say that some of our initiatives from the last couple of years, including the large events around military milestones last year, in Canada and overseas, have created a really positive outreach for Canadians. They are witnessing more inclusivity. The recent one I was speaking about, in 2005, was a change in approach for us in the department and for the Government of Canada. It influenced how we were looking to do our ceremonies and our programming going forward.

● (1145)

Mr. Bob Bratina: One of the individuals we met in Beauval was a 98-year-old veteran who had served in Sicily and Italy. He had walked over 100 miles to enlist, and upon his discharge, he walked 100-and-something miles back again. I posted the picture of this remarkable man on my Facebook. My community, Hamilton, has a large Italian Canadian population. People were very touched that this 98-year-old aboriginal veteran had gone to Sicily and Italy. As a matter of fact, his best friend lost his life during the war and was buried in Italy.

I was really pleased with the outpouring of recognition he received, but it reminded me that in most of the conversations we had, there was almost an insistence that we know and understand what these people did, and, as one man said, without an allegiance: we just did it because we felt it was the right thing to do.

So we need to get the message out, and I'm glad to hear that we're doing it.

I have a brief question on compensation. This man who walked back 100 miles was Métis. We were told that they had nothing, they got nothing, and they got no recognition. There was the suggestion of compensation. Is that a discussion that's being held among the department?

Ms. Faith McIntyre: I can say that we're actively engaged with our colleagues in Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs in the discussions regarding permanent bilateral mechanisms with first nations, Inuit, and Métis. Certainly, indigenous veterans are a key priority as the government moves forward in, as you know, advancing the spirit of reconciliation. It's certainly a conversation that's ongoing.

I certainly appreciate your story and the comment. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser, you have five minutes.

Mr. Colin Fraser (West Nova, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all very much for joining us today and for your comments.

Ms. Savoie, I'd like to pick up on something you talked about earlier, in response to a question from Ms. Wagantall, about a reciprocal agreement with the United States in delivering services through VAC to Canadians who fought for the American military.

We had a witness come before our committee a couple of weeks ago, and she indicated that there were no services available that she was aware of. Her spouse, now passed away, did fight in the U.S. military. Can you give an example of what services are available through VAC for those who have served in the U.S. and for their families as well? What work is being done in order to proactively engage these individuals to make sure they're aware of those services?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: These agreements have existed since the 1950s, so they're very old agreements.

Basically it's the same service offered; it's just that we offer the service and then we turn it in and the country refunds us. They do the same thing for the Canadian veterans in the U.S. or Australia. They then pass the bill to us and we refund them. That's how the agreement works.

It's the same service. It's based on their needs. If they need help at home or if they need mental health support, we'll provide the service and then bill the other country.

Mr. Colin Fraser: So, if we got this spouse, who's before our committee, in touch with Veterans Affairs, you're saying that there would most likely be services available for that person and her family.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I can't speak for a specific case because I don't know the exact information, but I would certainly encourage her to contact our offices.

● (1150)

Mr. Colin Fraser: I just mean generally speaking.

Does Veterans Affairs Canada proactively work with the U.S. counterparts on knowing or identifying these veterans and their families who are living in Canada, so that we can make sure they're aware of the services available for them?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: There's not that I know of, no.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Do you think something could be done to facilitate better identification of these individuals through co-operation across the border?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I'll take your comment. Thank you.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thank you.

I think, Ms. McIntyre, you just mentioned working that the department is working with Crown-Indigenous Services to identify some things that can be done to improve service delivery to indigenous veterans.

Does VAC ever deal directly with, for example, a band office locally in identifying services that are available so that the word can get out there on a reserve in Canada?

Ms. McIntyre, can you answer that?

Ms. Faith McIntyre: Yes, indeed.

Our work with Crown-Indigenous Relations is very broad and at a policy level, through permanent bilateral mechanisms, so I think Maryse is best positioned to respond at a local on-the-ground level for you, sir.

I'll turn it to her.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: It's part of us reaching out with partners and stakeholders. When we reach out to elders and leaders, we reach out to specific bands' members and so on.

So, yes, there is a lot of effort put into establishing connections and building on these connections to build a relationship and promote our programs, and create the awareness in regard to what we have to offer and, ultimately, reach out to veterans and their families.

Mr. Colin Fraser: I think you're right about the outreach and communication piece being so important for people to be aware of the services that are available and to build up that trust and relationship.

I just worry that sometimes the department could be doing more engaging of the local community, either through the band office or.... We visited the town council at Six Nations reserve and they were unaware of anything that was happening at VAC. There's a veterans' community centre there, and they didn't have any materials at all from Veterans Affairs to distribute to their membership.

I think if you can identify, through the local organizations and governments, the right people to talk to in the community and get that information to them, it would be helpful.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Absolutely. Thank you.

Mr. Colin Fraser: I'd like to turn to the commemoration piece, which Mr. Bratina was just speaking about. I agree that it's so important. I was fortunate enough, Ms. Robichaud, to go over to Vimy for the 100th anniversary commemoration ceremonies, and I thought it was remarkable how indigenous veterans were on that trip and were paired with young people from across Canada.

I'm wondering if you see including indigenous youth on those types of trips as well as a way forward to engaging youth to understand the history of the contribution indigenous veterans have made to our country.

Ms. Hélène Robichaud: Yes, absolutely.

I think with our programming in 2017, we also were trying and testing out new approaches. Given that this was an event marking the First World War, those veterans are deceased, so it is very obvious that we need to ensure that the legacy is carried forward.

What better way than to connect the generations? What we've been doing in the last two years overseas, and also in Canada, is trying to ensure that there are youth who represent an indigenous community so that there's that connection.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Wagantall, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Savoie, you talked about the Veterans in the public service unit that was created and came into play in 2016, and I want to bring to your attention what we said to Assistant Deputy Minister Elizabeth Stuart when she was here testifying with human resources.

I know an individual who wants to work for the public service and reached out to my office as a veteran who is right now involved with the JPSU. The JPSU was not aware in June 2018 of the VPSU program, so I think we have some work to do there to make sure those communications are happening right at that point where they're having to find a new direction. They were not at all aware of that program.

● (1155)

Ms. Maryse Savoie: It's surprising, because that program was launched during the Invictus Games in Toronto during the veterans career summit. That was a big event.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes. It shows you how much, over and over again....

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I know. There's never enough communication. I think that's one proof of it, yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's all fine.

Again, in regard to reaching out and building those networking groups, the Yorkton Tribal Council in my riding represents in some ways a number of different first nations groups. If they were to reach out and say that they want you to come and provide them with education for, say, an individual from each reserve to be able to be aware of what those services are, to build that, would that happen?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: We are more than willing to do that. Absolutely, yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'd like to talk to you about indigenous veterans associations. There are a number of them that we had an opportunity to connect with. Again, they are self-created to meet the needs of the veterans in their communities. In many ways, they do the work of the legion. Of course, back in the day, our indigenous veterans weren't allowed to join the legion, so this became their source of care.

I'm wondering about how much you reach out to them as well, if you're aware of all of them, to actually build those relationships where they know the veterans.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I have a list of the partners with whom we're partnering. It's mostly with the Royal Canadian Legion and the local health authorities. I could give you some examples, if you wish, of partners that we—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's fine. I'm just wondering if that's a source for you as well.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Oh yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I know that in Saskatchewan they're very strong.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: We're open to any connection that could help us reach out to the veterans.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: On another issue, I know that the younger generation is more comfortable with the My VAC account and reaching out online. We encourage that, but we've talked about rural and remote areas struggling with it.

The Prime Minister was in Saskatchewan last summer, I believe, and was trying to use his cellphone on a farm. He said, "Wow, yes, it's really difficult here." He was 15 minutes out of our capital city. That again gives you an idea of the challenge for a lot of people to do what we're hoping they will do, but who really do need more of that face-to-face communication.

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Yes, absolutely. I agree.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I think that's all I have.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos, you have five minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): I'll be splitting my time with Doug.

Thank you for being here with us today to answer some of our questions.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Savoie, you mentioned that you are not aware of the exact number of veterans in northern Canada, in the Territories. We certainly can't help them in the best possible way if we don't know they exist or how many of them there are.

What do you think our government and your department could do to improve that situation so that we have a better idea of the number of veterans who live in the north?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I'd like to clarify something.

We know that in the three Territories, the estimated number of veterans is 1,900. What we do not know is how many of these veterans are indigenous.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I see.

So, perhaps you need to work better with...

Ms. Maryse Savoie: We need more refined statistics from the Canadian census. That would most certainly help us to clarify the situation, to determine where our clientele is located in the Territories, and perhaps to focus our efforts better in that area.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Very well, thank you.

You referred to a centre of excellence. You spoke at some length about technology and the way in which it can improve access to services.

Can you tell us how this will help to provide more assistance in the Territories, in the north, where technology is not necessarily present? Do you have any other ways of intervening directly in these communities?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: I don't know if Ms. McIntyre wants to answer.

I can begin, and Ms. McIntyre, you can add to what I say.

The centre of excellence that was announced is a mental health centre of excellence. There is no doubt that the more expertise we develop in mental health, the more helpful this is to veterans as a whole. There may be an opportunity to do research specifically on the needs of indigenous veterans, but for the moment that is still in the preliminary stage. It's something to develop for the future.

● (1200)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Very well. Thank you very much.

Mr. Eyolfson, I'll give you the speaking time I have left.

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I don't have a lot of time here, so I'd like to get back to something that both Ms. Wagantall and Mr. Fraser talked about. We had a witness whose husband was in the American army. He died in action, and she mentioned having some troubles contacting Veterans Affairs.

I know you can't comment on one specific case, and one cannot make conclusions about an entire system from one specific case, but the laws of statistics say where there's one, there have to be others.

Is your department aware of any veterans or families of veterans who have served in the States who are having trouble with this kind of issue? Do you know of any cases or any active cases where such difficulties are being addressed right now?

Ms. Maryse Savoie: Honestly, I'm not aware of any myself. I don't know if my colleagues are aware, if Faith is aware, of any.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I'll put this out in the open.

No? All right.

Would it be a good opportunity at this point to maybe do some outreach and put out a call through these communities to ask whether there are any veterans or any veterans' families in this situation who are having such difficulties? This is one case, but this person has been waiting eight months for a reply from Veterans Affairs.

In addition, a lot of indigenous veterans have said that they get caught in a game of Ping-Pong between VAC and Indigenous Affairs because they're indigenous. It sounds as though this individual is being caught in, if there's such a thing, a three-way game of Ping-Pong among VAC, Indigenous Affairs, and the American armed forces.

Right now she is travelling to, I believe, Minot, North Dakota, on her own dime, to get the services, because she spent so long accessing what's available.

I would recommend that VAC start digging into the records and finding out where these are, because as I say, if there's one, there have to be others. Even one case like this is probably too many and needs to be addressed.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll recess now and come back with our second panel.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank all three of you for presenting today and for all you do for the men and women who have served.

I know there were some questions that you might want to expand on, or some information that you have to get back to the committee. If you could get it back to the clerk, she'll distribute. Thank you for today.

We'll recess for about three minutes.

• _____ (Pause) _____

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• (1205)

The Chair: This is our second hour.

We welcome back Phillip Ledoux, vice-president of Prince Albert, who video conferenced in last week and then we had some video conference difficulties.

Welcome back, Mr. Ledoux.

As an individual, we have Whitney Lackenbauer, professor at the department of History, at St. Jerome's University.

Mr. Lackenbauer, we'll start with you for 10 minutes, please.

Professor Whitney Lackenbauer (Professor, Department of History, St. Jerome's University, As an Individual): Good afternoon. It's an honour to appear before the Veterans Affairs Committee today.

As mentioned, I am Whitney Lackenbauer. I'm a professor of history at St. Jerome's University and the University of Waterloo. I'm also the honorary lieutenant colonel of the 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group based in Yellowknife, with 60 patrols spanning Canada's three northern territories and northern British Columbia.

I want to emphasize that I'm appearing before the committee as an individual, not as an official representative of the Canadian army, so please consider my views accordingly.

In terms of background, I've been interested in indigenous veterans' issues since the mid-1990s. At that time, the topic was gaining significant political attention in Ottawa, building on the strong advocacy efforts of indigenous organizations and veterans' organizations.

I would like to echo Dr. Sheffield, who appeared before you last month, in applauding the positive steps that have been taken over the last two decades by the Government of Canada to recognize, acknowledge, and honour the proud history of indigenous service in the Canadian Armed Forces, as well as to offer compensation to first nations' veterans for inequitable treatment after the Second World War and Korean War.

Scott and I wrote an article together about a decade ago suggesting that indigenous veterans were no longer forgotten warriors. They have become a part of the canon of Canadian military history, with soldiers such as Francis Pegahmagabow and Tommy Prince, widely recognized as Canadians of national historical significance. The national aboriginal veterans monument here in downtown Ottawa is a tangible example of this recognition, as is the highly visible and prominent place of first nations, Métis, and Inuit serving personnel and veterans in national Remembrance Day parades, commemorative ceremonies, and pilgrimages abroad.

Nevertheless, I think there could be and should be more attention given to first nations, Métis, and Inuit veterans who served during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era, as well as in the role of Canadian Armed Forces personnel who have defended our country at home. In this respect, I am thinking of the Canadian rangers and their unique forms in terms of service.

My apologies if I'm covering a bit of familiar ground for some of you, but I want to provide you with a bit of background information on the rangers, because I think their status, terms of service, and role are often misunderstood. I provided the committee with a two-page overview of some basic facts about the rangers. My apologies if the French isn't great. My translation might be a little off.

My comments today are intended to touch on a few things the committee might wish to consider when thinking about the rangers in the context of Veterans Affairs.

First of all, the rangers are a subcomponent of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve Force, so they are serving members of the military. They are not a program like Bold Eagle or the junior Canadian rangers. They are reservists in military units that conduct national security and public safety missions in sparsely settled northern, coastal, and isolated areas of Canada that cannot conveniently or economically be covered by other parts of the military.

They are not soldiers, but they are reservists who act as the Canadian military's eyes, ears, and voice in remote regions, and they share their expertise and guidance during operations and exercises with our soldiers. This is important to keep in mind as I always worry that references that creep into the ranger program perpetuate misconceptions that they are a program akin to the cadets or the junior Canadian rangers, and not full members of the Canadian Armed Forces, which they are—full members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

The ranger funding model is based upon 12 days' annual pay for each ranger, in support of their training and conducting of patrols. They are also compensated for other official taskings as well as for wear and tear on their personal vehicles and equipment, which they use during ranger activities. In addition to annual community-based training, rangers conduct surveillance and presence or sovereignty patrols, collect local information that's relevant to the military, and report unusual activities or sightings during the course of their everyday lives.

Furthermore, they support or lead humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and search and rescue operations in their homelands. These activities often put them in harm's way, and the danger to life and limb is often very real during northern exercises and operations. There's nothing routine about many of these training activities or operations.

Second, while indigenous peoples comprise the majority of ranger membership, particularly in Inuit Nunangat and parts of the territorial and provincial north, the rangers are not an indigenous program and are not an indigenous unit. Participation in the rangers is open to Canadians of all backgrounds, but given where the patrols are located and the encouragement that these patrols be reflective of local demographics, the majority of rangers are indeed indigenous Canadians.

I would caution you that the official statistics that I have received from the army, which are based upon incomplete self-identification surveys and which indicate that somewhere around 30% of rangers are of indigenous descent, are based upon a very incomplete survey and dramatically under-report indigenous participation rates in some of the patrol groups—I think, particularly, in 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group and 3rd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group in northern Ontario.

Having access to more reliable data on indigenous participation rates is important for several reasons, including what might be the unique needs of indigenous veterans.

● (1210)

It is also ironic to me that ranger statistics are often excluded from official statistics about indigenous participation in the Canadian military, which has the dual effect of treating the rangers as if they're not real reservists, which is unfair and untrue, and of devaluing the rangers as performing a unique form of military service that has proven highly attractive to many indigenous peoples in northern and isolated coastal communities. I'd also like to highlight that at least 21% of Canadian rangers across Canada are women, so this is much closer to the CAF's one-quarter goal than the regular force or primary reserves. It's quite a success story.

In terms of specific issues concerning veterans who served with the Canadian rangers, their unique terms of service may be relevant to how the committee assesses the needs of indigenous veterans who've served in the rangers and the challenges associated with addressing these needs.

First, because rangers are not subject to minimal operational standards related to universality of service, including the operational standard for physical fitness, and rangers do not undergo a medical examination prior to enlisting, this may complicate efforts to discern what are service-related injuries or illnesses rather than pre-existing ones. This could affect career impact allowances, critical injury benefits, or disability benefits and pensions.

Second, because there's no compulsory retirement age for rangers, a strong culture of people identifying as ranger veterans simply does not exist in the north. In fact, I've never heard anyone refer to her- or himself as such. Perhaps they refer to themselves as a "former ranger", but never as a ranger veteran. Rangers can serve as long as they are physically and mentally capable of doing so, as identified by their patrol and local culture, and elders are valued for the traditional and local knowledge and land skills that they bring to the ranger organization.

As some of you may know, there have been rangers who have served in uniform well into their 80s and 90s. I'll be at the 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group change-of-command parade tomorrow in Yellowknife, where two rangers will be getting their CD4s: Ranger Ookookoo Quaraq of the Pond Inlet Patrol, for 52 years of continuous service, and Ranger Ilkoo Angutikjuak, a member of the Clyde River Patrol, who has been serving continuously for the last 53 years. Continuing to serve rather than voluntarily releasing obviously impacts their access to some Veterans Affairs benefits and services.

I digress.

The CF ombudsman recently completed a report that documented factors which could impact Canadian rangers' access to health care entitlements and related benefits. I'm not going to attempt to provide you with an overview of everything that was covered in that report. I've included their main recommendations in the two-pager that I circulated.

Some of the issues they identified that could be of direct interest to this committee include a lack of awareness on the part of rangers about the health care benefits to which they're entitled as reservists, as well as a lack of awareness about Veterans Affairs benefits, such as compensation for service-related illnesses and injuries, support during the transition to civilian life, financial assistance, and support for health and well-being.

The report indicated that 89% of ranger respondents who sustained an injury on ranger duty did not submit a claim, and most rangers fail to report or consistently track their illnesses or injuries. This may complicate their access to veterans health care entitlements and related benefits.

Furthermore, many rangers, as residents of remote communities, have limited access to specialized medical care, including mental health services, compared to Canadians in other parts of the country and have to travel outside of their communities to receive CAF health care, with many rangers emphasizing that they are reluctant to leave their communities and their support networks to seek that kind of care.

The ombudsman's report also highlighted the need to eliminate ambiguity and inconsistencies in some policies, orders, and instructions related to health care entitlements and eligibilities to rangers, and this may carry over to veterans' benefits more generally.

Finally, and most directly, the report found that most rangers are not aware that they may be entitled to Veterans Affairs benefits and services as a serving member or as a veteran.

In terms of other specific topics the committee may wish to explore, I'm not sure if the CAF income support applies to rangers or if former rangers have access to the veterans emergency fund, which is designed to deal with veterans' homelessness. Furthermore, I have no idea if veterans education and training benefits are available to ranger veterans. I don't have answers to these questions. I would certainly want to see the results of a deliberate needs assessment before suggesting that these are areas in need of attention or warrant the investment of resources at this time.

Nevertheless, the simple message that rangers should be more aware of veterans benefits that are available to them as reservists to me is an obvious one. If this information is not being communicated to them, it should be explained to them at some point in their ranger training or at the very least consolidated into a short booklet or web page that can be translated into various indigenous languages and circulated to rangers.

I hope this short introduction has been useful. I certainly welcome your questions and comments.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll again go to our video conference. From Saskatoon, we have Phillip Ledoux, vice-president of the Prince Albert branch of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association.

Welcome back, Phillip. The floor is yours.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux (Vice-President, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Ellis. Good morning to you and your committee.

First of all, I would like to highlight a few of the comments I made last week, and then I'll continue with today's presentation.

First of all, the vision statement of our First Nations Veterans Association is to bring equality to all our SFNVA members and to close the gap in the quality of life between first nations and non-first nation veterans and families.

There have been considerable historical promises made to first nation veterans, and a lot of these have fallen through the cracks. One of the things we submitted last week that you had requested was a proposal for support back in September of 2017. Again, we haven't received any response from the crown.

Because we are veterans and have lived through armed conflict, we see the wave of mental health needs facing our communities and the supportive response required. Mental health issues, specifically PTSD, remain a growing crisis facing not only veterans but also first nations communities.

Those are some of the issues that I highlighted in our first presentation. Now, I'll present my presentation for this part of the exercise.

Thank you for inviting me to return to speak on the critical issues facing Saskatchewan first nation veterans. The issues I am speaking to have long been of great concern and are reaching a critical point in terms of their severity. These issues need immediate resolution, a redress for veterans.

When first nation veterans answered the call to serve, we fought, and in some cases perished alongside our non-indigenous brothers in arms. This is something we were prepared to do; however, we were not prepared for the treatment we received afterwards. There was a great injustice perpetrated against the families the veterans left behind. Although families were entitled to survivor and widow benefits, what actually occurred was that the Indian agents on reserve deemed the widows and families of veterans who perished as wards beholden to the benevolence of the Indian agent.

This meant that, in many cases, the benefits for widows and their families were never disbursed beyond the Indian agents themselves, and we have documented proof of this. Widows and families were left without aid and were forced to navigate the loss of their family members and left with the sole responsibility of caring for their families. This injustice has never been addressed. We have no idea how many families this has affected.

What we know is that many of the families of veterans who perished in conflict were further disrupted as part of the sixties scoop because the crown left them no means to continue caring for their families. There has never been redress for these widows or their families.

● (1220)

The other issue I would like to raise is the wait times in receiving services from Veterans Affairs. It is well-known that services on reserve are at best minimal, and at worst non-existent. Many veterans must wait years for their claims to be processed. When claims are processed, there is no consideration of how veterans are supposed to access services, or no services exists.

Veterans Affairs assumes that access to services on reserve is the same as off-reserve urban centres. This is absolutely not the case. Where no services exist on reserve, veterans have two choices. They either go without or they absorb the personal costs to access services off reserve. First nations' veterans need a specific claim process that considers the proximity and access to services needed. Furthermore, they need an advocate who can assist them within the claim and appeals process.

There can be no surprise when I speak to the next issue. The pervasive occurrence of veteran suicide is of national concern. For first nation veterans, the issue of mental health and suicide is of utmost urgency and has not been adequately addressed. There is no comprehensive national database that can differentiate the rates of suicide occurrence between first nation veterans and non-first nation veterans, and certainly no mechanism that can differentiate between off- and on-reserve rates of veteran suicide.

Given the lack of infrastructure and services on reserve, consideration must be immediately forthcoming to look at providing comprehensive mental health services wherever veterans reside. Suicide and mental health are not issues that affect recently released veterans, but an issue that affects all veterans throughout their lifetime, regardless of the years in which their service occurred.

Another item I would like to address to the committee is regarding veterans' monuments. Several first nation communities applied for funding to erect veteran monuments, but were never considered, or were denied. Also, our dream is to have similar facilities much like those of the legions with similar services accessible for first nation veterans and their families.

I would like to make a comment on the veterans' monuments. I come from a first nation, the Mistawasis First Nation in north-central Saskatchewan. Since the Boer War up until present, we've had approximately 80 men and women who have enlisted in the armed services, and to date there is no monument there to honour these people.

I would like to thank the standing committee for allowing me to speak about these critical issues, and I look forward to seeing positive change for not only first nations' veterans, but all veterans.

● (1225)

At this time I would like to invite questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

With the lack of time, we'll have to do four-minute rounds.

We'll start with Ms. Wagantall.

● (1230)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to both of you for being here today. We're dealing with two very different subjects—

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Excuse me. Could you speak a little louder, please?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sure.

We have two different focuses here, Phillip. I'm hoping to give you each a little bit of time here in my four minutes.

First, Whitney, you talked about the needs recognized up north. They are fairly typical to anywhere rural, although I think they're probably accentuated even more the further you go north. That being said, what is the current practice of tracking and reporting injuries and whatnot for the rangers service?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: I'd defer to the DND-CAF ombudsman's report on that one. They did the more intense research on it. Their finding was that there is not reliable data on it. I'm not intending to speak for the ombudsman's office by any stretch, but they identified as an absolute need the requirement to make sure there's compliance with tracking of illnesses and injuries, as per proper reservist practice. I think that goes on within the reserves more broadly, and can be a problem within the CAF, as some serving personnel are reticent to be recorded as having gotten an injury or illness for fear that it may somehow be used against them when they're going out.

Given the informal nature of clearing people for heading out on the land as rangers, I think some of those concerns on the part of rangers will also have to be considered in ensuring that rangers feel comfortable sharing that information and tracking it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

Phillip, can you hear me now?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: I'm getting up in age. My hearing has become—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I understand. My husband and I are into lip-reading now—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: —in more ways than one.

On that kind of silly note, I do want to talk to you about the concerns around veterans suicide. This committee has heard over and over again about how this is a growing concern for our veterans, certainly with first nations indigenous veterans as well as generally. I know personally of the loss of two more last week.

For yourself, why do you think it is that we haven't done a good job of tracking something like this?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: I have talked to quite a few veterans, first nation and non-first nation, and we believe the same thing: we have committees in Ottawa trying to address our concerns relating to veterans and nobody understands a veteran better than a veteran. We feel that this program dealing with mental health issues, PTSD, should be comprised of military people who have experienced it first-hand.

We have talked to people who say, "We know. We understand." No, you don't. You don't understand what we went through. You would have to have lived it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Mr. Eyolfson, you have four minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you very much.

Thank you both for coming.

Mr. Ledoux, you gave accounts of families—this isn't the first time I've heard it, but I'm still shocked to hear it—who were considered, as you say, wards of the Indian agent, and the monies withheld. It is shameful. As a Canadian, I feel ashamed to hear that this happened.

I'm wondering if you have any idea of how long ago this last happened. Has it been happening up until recent times or is it more remote? How long ago did this last happen?

● (1235)

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Not very long ago—quite recently.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I was afraid that would be the answer.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: I also have one comment I would like to make regarding the legions. This is supposed to be an organization for the betterment of services for veterans and their families. We have experienced personally that there is a difference in the service provided.

In some cases, there is outright refusal to serve first nation veterans. I talked to one veteran in particular, who wore his uniform, who had his medals on—he served in Korea—and he entered a legion, and he was turned away. Why? Is this what we fought for? Is this why we put on the uniform?

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Again, I was not aware of that. That is shameful. You're right; that is not what you fought for, and I'm sorry.

We obviously have a very long way to go, and that is one of the reasons we're doing this study. We want to find out what these issues are and what we can do to fix them. That can't make things better from the past, but I'm hoping that with this, we can improve things for the future.

Just to go on, because I want to get some testimony from both witnesses, Mr. Lackenbauer, can you speak to the relationship with indigenous people in the military comparatively to other jurisdictions around the world? As you may know, one of our previous studies was a comparative study.

Can you say how we rank, or how things go with how other countries treat their indigenous veterans?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: Certainly.

There's been some fantastic work done in other countries, like Australia, New Zealand, United States, other British settler societies, as Dr. Sheffield referred to them a few weeks ago to you. Again, there is a lot of commonality across the board.

It depends on what era we're looking at, as well. Certainly with a lot of the treatment from the World Wars, Korean War era, there are a lot of commonalities across the board. Dr. Sheffield is working on a book with Noah Riseman of Australia that I think highlights a lot of those issues, and certainly Dr. Riseman has done a lot of work on what's going on in Australia and New Zealand.

In terms of looking at some practices that are specific to indigenous veterans, I think there's some very interesting literature that's been produced in the United States looking at Vietnam War veterans, so native Americans who served in the Vietnam War, and some of the practices of devising culturally appropriate mechanisms to help those individuals transition back to civilian life in a culturally appropriate way. That might be helpful in informing some of the background material for this.

It's hard to draw a general estimate about how Canada ranks compared to others. There are a lot of commonalities in challenges, and certainly the difficulties experienced by indigenous veterans across the board, as Mr. Ledoux has articulated for us here.

However, some of the efforts over the last decade, decade and a half, in Canada to acknowledge these problems and try to seek some sort of reconciliation on them, I think have been positively received, not only in Canada, but in other countries as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns, four minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thanks.

First, Mr. Lackenbauer, I hope it's okay on behalf of the committee to pass on our congratulations and thanks to those people in Whitehorse tomorrow. Also, I hope you get the answers to the questions that you put forward to Veterans Affairs.

I'll start with Mr. Ledoux. Thank you for your service, sir.

You talked about nobody understanding a veteran more than a veteran. We've heard in the United States that they shoot for a goal of 30% of their front-line caseworkers being former veterans.

Would it help to have designated aboriginal veterans and aboriginal liaison officers working for Veterans Affairs to serve aboriginal veterans?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Most likely.

That is very commendable, but we have yet to see it.

Mr. Gord Johns: Right, I figured that.

Recently we heard from rural communities. It was through the ministerial advisory council on mental health, which hasn't met for quite some time, but they did recommend that in-patient facilities should be built.

Do you agree that it would help veterans who are suffering from PTSD to have an in-patient care facility? We can't have resources all throughout the country, but maybe something that is built in-house with some sort of culturally sensitive caseworkers working there as well.

● (1240)

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: We've had this exercise about two years ago here in Saskatchewan. There was a former sanatorium that was out of use and we were looking at the possibility of purchasing that building. When the owners found out they were going to deal with first nations, the price of the building skyrocketed way beyond our means, and that's the way it existed. This facility would have been ideal for our disabled veterans, instead of putting them in other facilities. They would be among their own people and could practice their own culture, and generally we could look after ourselves in our way because we do have cultural differences.

Mr. Gord Johns: I really appreciate that. I hope Veterans Affairs —

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: I have one other comment. You mentioned veterans from other countries. I do extensive research on veterans and the services for the famed Gurkhas of India, who are one of the most famous military units, are worse than ours, and that's the truth.

Mr. Gord Johns: I know I only have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Lackenbauer, you talked about practices around the world. Is there a country that's doing a great job at having former veterans as their caseworkers doing front-line work, or with their return-to-work policies? Is there any leadership that you can identify?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: That's out of my area of expertise, sir. I can't provide you information on that.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Ledoux, in terms of the proposal that you sent in December, is there anything in it that VAC hasn't replied to you about and that you want us to know about here at the committee?

The Chair: We're down to about 15 seconds for that answer.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: What I would like to see is an official response that you people received it, because, like I said before, we sent it to eight different ministers and there was no response at all. The eight are still outstanding, which needs to be addressed today, not tomorrow.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Ellis, can I ask that we get that sent to the committee?

The Chair: We've already asked for it at the last meeting. Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos, four minutes please.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much for being here with us both of the witnesses. I'm going to first begin by asking Professor Whitney Lackenbauer something.

You mentioned that the rangers don't often identify as veterans once they retire, if they retire. You said that their service is continuous and that often, not too many of them end up in the veteran category. For them to receive services from Veterans Affairs, or to begin even contemplating looking for these services from Veterans Affairs, I guess they would need to consider themselves as veterans. What do you think we can do to help them understand that this is the category they fall under, for which they then have access to these services?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: That's wonderful. I think, first of all, we need to open up a dialogue with the ranger community about this. I think the statistics from 2013-2016 indicated that the average annual national ranger release rate was about 3.8% per year. That means there are actually quite a sizeable number of them, some 5,000 rangers across the country who are leaving the forces. That's a significant number who are voluntarily releasing from Canadian Armed Forces service, which I think is worthy of consideration. I think to even identify what their interests might be in accessing these services is something that should begin with a conversation.

One of the necessary preconditions to better understanding the opportunities and challenges that we face is getting more robust data on the rangers. Right now the headquarters of the different ranger patrol groups are dramatically understaffed; they need more clerks and ranger instructors, who are the key means of accessing that kind of data. And until we have a sense of what sort of numbers we're looking at and a demographic profile of those individuals who have released from the rangers, I'm not sure we'll even be in a position yet to figure out what that opportunity space looks like.

● (1245)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: And you also spoke a lot about the very important work they do that is sometimes undervalued.

How do you think we can spread the word to the Canadian population about the importance of what they do out there?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: Great. I think it's a responsibility of all of us to communicate and celebrate the various forms of service that the Canadian Armed Forces provide to our country. I think a lot of the attention and public association with veterans is with individuals who served overseas during the world wars, the Korean War, and of course more recently in Afghanistan.

I think it's important to also commemorate the work of Canadian Armed Forces personnel, men and women who have served to defend our country here in Canada. I think that members of the Canadian rangers and indigenous personnel more broadly become part of that story. I think, particularly in the Canadian north and in isolated coastal communities, because of the high rates of indigenous representation in the rangers, that will inherently become a very indigenous part of our military history.

Again, we encourage recognition of this form of service on the home front, the home game, as service to the country, and that individuals who served on the home front indeed be recognized as veterans.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Monsieur Ledoux, thank you for being here with us for a second time.

I know that last time you spoke about the work you do in trying to bridge the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous veterans, you felt that there was unfairness and that they aren't treated equally. Can you speak a little more to that point and mention what happened at the legion? Are there a lot of examples like this?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Yes. First of all, when we were in active service with the military, both with our first nations and non-first nations military, we were treated as equals. We called each other "brother" or "sister", whatever the case might have been, and we acknowledged each other. Then it seemed that when we left the military, that disappeared. When we returned to our home territory, even our own people treated us differently because we had seen things, experienced things, they had not seen. It is very rare for a veteran to speak about his personal experiences while serving in the military, but we talk among ourselves because we know what we went through.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much for all the work you do on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser, you have four minutes.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for joining us, Professor Lackenbauer and Mr. Ledoux.

Mr. Ledoux, are you generally aware of the programs and services available to veterans from Veterans Affairs Canada? Do you feel that you're given enough information from Veterans Affairs Canada in a simple manner to explain to your members what services are available to them?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Yes, but you need to be a lawyer or a professor to understand what some of the paperwork is requesting. Application forms are very—

Mr. Colin Fraser: I understand. As a lawyer I don't even know if that would be enough to understand all of the complications around the services available, so I take your point well on that.

Do you work with the reopened veterans' office in Saskatoon to get information to your local members?

● (1250)

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: I am very good friends with one of the ladies there. She is an advocate for our first nation veterans, but we have yet to make any progress because the reopening of the office was so recent..

Mr. Colin Fraser: If I could turn for a moment to the monuments and the commemoration you spoke about, you talked about one community in particular that has had a number of veterans serve our country who have not been recognized. When this committee travelled, we went to Beauval, Saskatchewan. There is a monument there and a place for the community to gather on Remembrance Day. It's a symbol to honour the veterans from that area. It was very touching to see how much that meant to the people in Beauval.

Which community did you say had, I think, 80 veterans?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: That was from my reserve, my home territory, my own community.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Okay. You mentioned that a number of applications were made from indigenous communities for veterans' memorials and monuments and that they were denied, or the communities didn't hear back. When were those applications made? Do you know if they've reached out to Veterans Affairs lately to see if there's any funding available?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: In the last two years there were programs available to erect monuments, and nothing's happened.

Mr. Colin Fraser: All right. We'll look into that.

Obviously, there's a program in place for monuments. There have to be criteria and rules around it, and not everybody is going to get approved. But if you don't mind sending that information to the committee, I'm interested in knowing about those applications and doing some follow-up.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Yes, we can do that. We have people in our office who are more than capable of handling that kind of paperwork.

Mr. Colin Fraser: All right, and thank you very much, sir, for everything you're doing. It's really much appreciated by every committee member, I'm sure.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Phillip, first of all, it's a pleasure to speak with you. I don't know if you remember, but we did meet a year ago this summer at Legion 001 in Regina, correct? You were in that meeting.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Yes, I was.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you again. Since that time, as a new member of Parliament I really appreciate the effort of our indigenous communities in my riding to reach out and to build into my life my ability to serve you as part of the riding. I want to recognize what I see, and saw, which is the commitment of your communities to recognizing your indigenous veterans at your powwows, which I attended in Yorkton, and I've seen the efforts there even with your own association in Saskatchewan. It's very much veterans helping veterans and valuing each other. Again, that reflects your view that no one knows what a veteran goes through more than a veteran.

I just want to say at this point that if there are individual scenarios in which you're struggling to get the care you need, please reach out to your member of Parliament's office, to my office, to the office in your area. We do have the ability to help, to direct you to get the services you need.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I appreciate that very much.

In regard to the monuments, and the mention of the one up in Beauval, this is a very important area. We need to make sure we're caring for our veterans and their communities. Are you aware of how many scenarios there would be in Saskatchewan in which they haven't received that monument or the support to get the monument?

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: There are possibly two.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: If you could share the information on those two situations, that would be very helpful for the committee.

● (1255)

Mr. Phillip Ledoux: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you very much.

That's all I have. Thank you both so much for what you presented to us today.

The Chair: Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Mr. Bratina is going to go.

The Chair: You're splitting with Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you, both. It's great to see you again.

Mr. Ledoux and Mr. Lackenbauer, I'm proud that I insisted that our committee visit the rangers. Their sovereignty patrol service is unique, and not common among other reserve groups. I mean, it's next stop Russia, in many cases.

Should our committee recommend that a special category of veterans be created for those veterans who have been serving 50-plus years and are still in service, but who may likely need to access some services that would have been available had they retired? Is that something that you think we need to look at because of this unusual circumstance?

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: The committee may decide that's a direction it wishes to explore. I certainly think, given the unique nature of service, that trying to fit the rangers into "normal" program delivery of Veterans Affairs services will be limited, given that the rangers live in isolated communities for the most part. Therefore, the notion that you could just seamlessly deliver services akin to those delivered to other former reservists or regular force members in southern parts of Canada is not going to happen.

Whether you consider having a specific category of rangers or situate this more broadly within your considerations of what should be done to ensure that people living in remote areas get access to services, again, I leave that to the committee to decide, but I do think the fact that many rangers are serving far beyond what would be a compulsory release rate in the primary reserves or regular force should be factored in when looking at what benefit entitlements are available to them.

Mr. Bob Bratina: This is exactly on the veterans topic, but in the work that they do, how do they transmit their information, and who gets it? I'm thinking there was a lot of disrespect. If the Franklin expedition had listened to the Inuit...they could have solved it 100 years ago. I'm hoping that there is respect for the information that those rangers are bringing forward.

Prof. Whitney Lackenbauer: Absolutely. A tremendous amount of respect is needed, which is why their roles, missions, and tasks have always had a provision for providing the information they gather over the course of their everyday lives in their local area and for making sure that information relevant to the military is communicated to it.

I would also sort of contextualize that in explaining that a ranger is paid, according to the budget, for up to 12 days of activities a year, but a ranger is a ranger 365 days a year. They are the eyes and ears of the military in remote northern and coastal communities all the time, so when they notice an activity or a person of interest, that's usually communicated through means that are familiar to many of us. Rangers, like most northerners, are very avid Facebook users. That can be one method of sending information, as well as by email, by fax, or by word of mouth. They're also very well connected to their communities.

There's one infamous case up north where somebody tied to organized crime in another country arrived on a small craft on the beach of one of the communities. Somebody from the community saw them, quickly went and got the local ranger sergeant, who in turn went and reported to the RCMP that this person had arrived. The person was then, of course, duly processed and shipped out of Canada after due process had taken its course.

To me there's a great example of being very low key. Rangers, by being members of their community and being plugged into their communities, really do have access to information that many of us would otherwise not have access to. They know what is unusual, and they have appropriate measures to communicate that to people who can act upon it. They do it on a regular basis.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Mr. Ledoux, if I—

The Chair: I'm sorry we're out of time.

That concludes our testimony today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank both of you for all that you have done and continue to do for our forces members who have served and continue to serve. Thank you for your testimony. If there's anything that you would like to add to your testimony, if you get it to the clerk, she'll get it to the committee.

Motion to adjourn.

● (1300)

Mr. Bob Bratina: I so move.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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